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ABSTRACT

Computer software was developed by a faculty member for college-level introductory commercial French to facilitate mastery of basic vocabulary and vocabulary manipulation techniques. The materials targeted three common areas of student difficulty: large amounts of new vocabulary, unfamiliar business concepts, and the formal style of business writing and correspondence. It was decided to keep the software simple in format while incorporating maximum comments, extensive error correction information, and frequent student analysis of materials. Instructions were standardized to avoid confusion. Vocabulary software already used in elementary and intermediate courses was adapted for commercial French vocabulary and coordinated with textbook chapters. Vocabulary learning exercises, emphasizing rapid acquisition of large numbers of words, generally consist of French-English and English-French translation of individual vocabulary items and short idiomatic expressions or phrases. Multiple-choice vocabulary manipulation exercises were developed to ensure student understanding of meanings and usage. Two verb programs provide systematic review of verb forms. Dictation and sentence translation exercises and a program for composing formal business correspondence were also developed. All programs were designed by an amateur programmer/language teacher using readily-available hardware and could be easily adapted or imitated to fill the needs of beginning commercial language students. (MSE)

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APPLICATIONS OF COMPUTER-AIDED INSTRUCTION IN BUSINESS FRENCH TRAINING

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Applications of Computer-Aided Instruction in Business French Training

Dr. Jayne Abrate

Although the profession now generally accepts the value of computer-aided instruction (CAI) in foreign languages, statistical studies are lacking on CAI effectiveness in foreign language applications and on the advisability of specific pedagogical options.[1] However, those who make use of computers for instructional purposes have noted increased competence and confidence in their students use of the language. Several possible explanations have been suggested for this phenomenon, such as the lure of the computer causing students to spend more time than they otherwise might with the material or to use that time more efficiently. It is also likely that instantaneous error correction creates greater awareness of a wrong answer and by stimulating a correct answer before the student can continue reinforces conscious mastery of the material (Nelson, et al., 30). CAI seems especially promising in commercial language courses where the instructors are often recycled literature faculty who may perhaps not feel as comfortable with business terms and techniques as they would like or would simply like to provide their students with additional means of assimilating terms as well as concepts which are completely new to them. The combination of wide variations in student knowledge of business in general along with the fact that the

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[1] Fischer offers some statistics for CAI in French.

instructor is often not an expert as he or she might be on a literary or cultural topic, cries out for supplementary materials and methodologies which promote student acquisition and use of the new information. This paper will describe some software this instructor developed for introductory level commercial French designed to facilitate mastery of basic vocabulary and vocabulary manipulation techniques.

These programs were developed at Drury College, a small liberal arts college offering two levels of commercial French. Most of those taking the course are at least fifth semester or equivalent language students of varying abilities and backgrounds. About one-half are business/ French majors, the others having a variety of different majors. The first level course uses the text French for Business by Claude LeGoff, and the Chambre de Commerce et d'Industrie de Paris "certificat pratique" exam is the goal at the end of the second semester of study.

In developing and teaching these courses, the instructor noticed three main problems which students seemed to have with the course material. The course is advertised as French culture for business rather than business in French which means that the business content remains quite rudimentary. Nonetheless, students encounter difficulty learning large amounts of, albeit basic, new vocabulary, have problems mastering unfamiliar business concepts, and often have trouble understanding and utilizing the particular formal style of articles, reports, and correspondence. Since the use of CAI has met with great success in regular language courses for verb form and

vocabulary acquisition, it was decided to incorporate CAI into the commercial French program.

Students have access to a computer lab equipped with 16 IBM-PC's as well as 8 IBM-PC's in the language laboratory and are required to spend one-half hour per week using the software of their choice. While more sophisticated uses of CAI are feasible, the level of the course content and the most apparent student needs dictated the selection of very introductory types of programs. These include vocabulary translation, vocabulary manipulation, both systematic and random verb review, dictation, translation, and composition of correspondence exercises.

A conscious pedagogical decision, also influenced by available hardware and the laboratory setting, was made to keep the software as simple as possible in format. No bells, buzzers, games, or fancy graphics are used, while, at the same time, maximum comments, extensive error correction information, and frequent student analysis of material are incorporated. The function keys are assigned each time to the same letter plus accent combinations in French, and instructions are standardized wherever possible. Thus, students do not have to readjust to new formats or input requirements as they change exercises as would be the case with randomly purchased software. Scores are reported to the user but not recorded. At present, there are no time limits, although these may be added later as an option for those who wish the added stimulus. Two tries are allowed before answers are furnished except in dictation and translation exercises where the student may try as long as he or she likes, and pressing the return

key will cause a correct answer to be displayed immediately if the student is at a complete loss.

Vocabulary software already used in elementary and intermediate courses was simply adapted for commercial French vocabulary and coordinated with the textbook chapters. The exercises consist basically of English to French and French to English translation of individual items and short idiomatic expressions or phrases. Up to four equivalents are possible for each translation; for instance, le prix may be translated as "the price," "the cost," "the prize," or "the award." When working from English to French, the first meaning choice, which is chosen to allow a one-to-one correspondence if possible, becomes the cue; thus, le prix, le coût, and le tarif are all acceptable translations of "the price." Definite articles are required with nouns where appropriate; l'achat would require "the purchase" for a correct response, while for la gestion, "management" would be acceptable as well as "the management" which could conceivably appear in a context. This feature encourages students to consider gender and the use of appropriate uses of the definite article. Error messages flag up to two accent errors, gender or article errors, and a missing "to" with an English infinitive. In addition, supplementary questions ask the student to determine if an infinitive is regular, irregular, or a spelling change verb, to give the gender of elided or plural nouns, or to give the feminine form of certain irregular adjectives, such as financier/financière.

While the value of vocabulary translation exercises may be

debated,[2] for simple acquisition of large quantities of new words, it is the students method of choice and probably the quickest way, although further work with using the words must be accomplished for them truly to assimilate the terms. Thus, to ensure that students understand the meanings and use of the items, vocabulary manipulation exercises were developed. These include the types of questions useful in preparing for the CCIP "certificat pratique" as illustrated in the LeGoff text, multiple-choice fill-ins, word families, synonyms, and antonyms. In terms of software, the multiple choice format allows detailed responses to incorrect student choices;[3] for example, the translation of a wrong choice is given before the student is asked to select again, and pressing return will provide the correct response as well as its translation. Furthermore, the synonym/antonym exercises, as do the translations discussed previously, allow for as many as four possible correct responses. Error responses for all but the multiple choice section are similar to those for the vocabulary translation program.

The two verb programs are also adapted from software already in use by elementary and intermediate classes. One version provides a systematic review of verb forms by asking the student to complete a standard verb paradigm using up to 120 verbs in 15 tenses. Error messages indicate errors of accent, verb ending, reflexive pronoun, helping verb, past participle agreement, or past participle

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[2] Holmes and Hope et al. both discuss various rationales for presenting new vocabulary in context.

[3] Holmes and Kidd examine further ways in which the multiple-choice format can be used to provide very specific error responses.

formation. The second version reviews verb forms randomly, and content changes were made to include verbs commonly used in commercial French, valoir, survenir, financer, acheter, diriger, gérer, as well as common irregular verbs, to reinforce both conjugation and acquisition of vocabulary. Loosely coordinated with the textbook chapters, students are given an infinitive, a subject, and a tense and asked to supply the correct verb form. Error messages are the same for both versions.

To conduct dictation exercises effectively, it is preferable to have an interactive tape recorder system, but, until the equipment becomes available, the following alternative is offered. The student sits at the computer with a portable cassette recorder and headphones. He or she controls the tape manually, rewinding if necessary (although four repetitions of a sentence are given), and then types in his or her response. This is certainly more cumbersome than a computer-controlled recording, but students who wish to practice dictation do not seem to mind the inconvenience, and since no student is required to use any particular software, those who do not wish to tolerate the inconvenience may simply do another exercise. The student's response is analyzed, and incorrect words are highlighted, while those containing only accent errors are underlined. Besides accent errors, error messages are otherwise keyed to parts of speech. Thus, is a student cannot decipher a particular word, a help message will indicate the part of speech required.

The creation of English to French or French to English translation exercises proves vastly more complicated. Even the most

carefully chosen sentences have alternative translations; word order may vary; or students may seek to transform the sentences in ways which are correct but difficult for an error analysis sequence to deal with. This program tries to avoid some such difficulties by keeping the sentences as straightforward as possible with one-to-one correspondences (not necessarily word-to-word) between items and their rendering in the target language. In addition, students are instructed to maintain the same word order in their translation whenever grammatically or stylistically feasible. Up to three synonyms are provided for individual words or expressions. Errors are indicated for simple accent problems; for other problems, messages are signaled by parts of speech such as article, verb tense, adjective agreement, or incorrect preposition errors.

There are no try or time limits. A student can work on a translation as long as he or she wishes, ending by pressing ALT + F1. A first scan of the response recopies it highlighting correct words and indicating if any words are out of order. It also causes words whose only problems are accent errors to be underlined and leaves blanks for missing or wrong words. Thus, the student may see his original entry as well as the indication of errors. The student may then enter word by word responses for the blanks without having to retype the whole sentence. If the student has no clue, he may enter a question mark for a help message which will indicate the part of speech needed. Following a second incorrect response, this message will also appear.

Although not available at present, eventually the student will

be able to print the translation for verification by the instructor. The student is told to check with the teacher if he believes a response is correct although it was not accepted by the program.

The final piece of software developed aids students in composing formal correspondence. Since, in French, the structure of business letters is so formulaic, it lends itself readily to a menu-type selection program. Students are asked a series of questions whose answers trigger a menu of introductory phrases, sentences, or synonyms from which he or she may choose. For instance, initial questions elicit the name and address of the expéditeur and destinataire, the place and date of composition, any previous references or pièces jointes, and the salutation. Students are asked to decide whether they wish to write in first person singular or plural, causing subsequent menu choices to be displayed only in the je or nous form selected and effectively eliminating a common student error. The menu possibilities have been culled from Le Parfait Secrétaire and numerous commercial correspondence manuals to provide standard formulas for the various types of letters:* accusé de réception, réclamation, passage d'une commande, annulation d'une commande, modification d'une commande, rappel de paiement, etc. The student types in his or her choice, finishing the sentence where necessary or including or adding any further specific information required. The software does not compose the letter for the student but merely simplifies and organizes the procedure one must follow in composing a coherent, well-written letter.

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* See a list of these works at the end of the Works Cited.

This program works using WordPerfect word-processing software. Once the student has composed a draft letter using the program, he enters WordPerfect, retrieves the document through the "Text-In" function, and proceeds to edit it into the normolettre format. In addition, WordPerfect does an excellent job with foreign language characters.

With the exception of the vocabulary translation and verb practice software, all these programs have been developed very recently and are still undergoing modification as students use them and discover bugs, unforeseen alternatives, in addition to ways of improving the programs' effectiveness. Certainly, there are more complex ways of using the computer, simulation exercises, for instance, which are frequently employed in business and economics courses. Adapted to the foreign language and foreign business culture, these would also be valuable learning tools for students of business language. However, in many settings, students do not have the business knowledge to benefit from such software. Using readily available computer hardware, the programs described here were written by an amateur programmer/language teacher and could readily be adapted or imitated by others. This software fills a definite need among beginning commercial French students, helps reduce the frustration factor in the first weeks of introduction to this specific use of language, and frees class time for more communicative activities.

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